

# Theoretical links between consumer behavior and movie watching decisions

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines consumer behavior in relation to watching movies, focusing on the specificities of decision-making as a film consumer, the links between the film interpretation of product life cycle theory and the way in which individual and social factors influence film viewing. The logical structure of the study, which is mainly based on literary sources, can be divided into three parts: an analysis of the consumer decision-making process, in particular in terms of extended purchasing decisions (which can be expressed at the level of both home and out-of-home movie watching decisions); an interpretation of the film life cycle model and the consumer entry points per life cycle stage; and an exploration of the film-specific characteristics of various consumer-specific influencing factors. The study highlights that movie watching preferences and decision making are a complex process involving many factors, and provides a comprehensive insight into understanding the dynamics between consumer behavior and the movie industry, which should be of particular value to any marketer or researcher working in the movie industry.*

**KEY WORD:** *movie consumption, consumer behavior, film life cycle, cultural marketing*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Watching movies is one of the most widespread forms of entertainment, and is common way to spend leisure time in almost all segments of modern society. However, movie consumption is not a simple consumer choice, but the result of complex processes in which many factors, including individual, social and market considerations, play a role. The movie industry is particularly sensitive to changes in consumer behavior, as audience choices influence the success of films, movie theater attendance, demand for physical releases and the popularity of streaming services.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the characteristics of consumer behavior related to film viewing, focusing in particular on three key areas: the process of movie consumption decision making, the market life cycle of films and potential consumer entry points, and finally the individual and social factors that may influence film-related preferences and decisions.

## II. Movie consumption decisions

The utility of movie consumption as a cultural good does not derive from its materiality – not even in the case of physical releases of movies (DVD or Blu-ray) in their materialized form. According to Pavluska (2014), these releases should also be seen as a medium that enables the reception and processing of different values, ideas and emotions. The types of decisions related to the watching of movies can be distinguished according to the extent to which the consumer looks into the characteristics of the service-product; how external influences affect him or her; and how much time is spent on making this decision. Based on the above – and the traditional division of consumer behavior – purchasing decisions can be routine, limited or extensive in nature. A routine decision is made, for example, when a new sequel is released to a favored movie franchise, the decision process here will be similar to decisions regarding products with high brand loyalty. When someone likes a particular genre, or a specific countries' movies, they might go into watching new releases without much deliberation – which itself is an act of repeat purchase. These sorts of connections are naturally consciously applied by the movie distributors to maximize the interest and reach of said releases (Benyahia – Gaffney – White, 2009; Farkas, 2020; Kohli et al., 2021). Limited decision making occurs when consumers make decisions based on the opinions and recommendations of acquaintances and film critics rather than basing it on their own thorough research (Gazley – Clark – Sinha, 2011; Jacobs et al, 2015; Legoux et al., 2016). Extension

purchase decision making is mainly characterized by the purchase of more expensive physical releases (whether because of the higher price point of new releases or the various collectors' editions), but the main decision stages are often also present in movie theaters and alternative methods of digital film viewing (Hofmeister-Tóth, 2006). These are further nuanced by the life cycle of the film.

- Problem identification: movies cannot be considered as solutions to immediate needs, thus this first stage is typically triggered by the marketing activities of film distributors.

- Information search: this can be passive or active. Consumers can easily use the Internet (they can search for the title of a film and access the film's details, trailer(s), or even the critics' and other viewers' ratings and reviews).

- Evaluation and choice: given the sheer – and ever expanding – volume of movies, it is impossible for consumers to consider all alternatives, so they choose from the choice they perceive, which itself is also constantly expanding and becoming more accessible (Farkas, 2020). To do this, they can define a variety of criteria, such as the various professional and viewer ratings of a film (Jacobs et al, 2015), or perhaps their own attitudes towards filmmakers and actors, or any combination of these (Kohli et al., 2021). Most consumers choose the movie first (Nyirő, 2013) – this is what makes this stage so important. During this process, they may be influenced by their past experiences and by various social and psychological factors. Their choice is also determined by the stage in the film's life cycle at which they would like to enter: whether to watch it immediately after release (depending on how early release this might be a decision following the immediacy trend) or to wait until it leaves the silver screens.

- Store selection and purchase: we may look at this stage as the selection of movie watching location, which could be the movie theaters – taking into account the ticket prices, proximity (distance from the movie-goers' places of living), facilities or even the food offerings of the movie theater –; the retail stores where the physical release may be obtained; or, in the case of digital movie watching, the choice of service providers (in case multiple stream services carry the same release at the same time). This is also the stage for determining the specific viewing device (such as a television or telephone) and the corresponding settings (common examples include the choices between available audio and subtitle options). In all these cases, the consumer's attitude towards the particular channel plays an important role, as well as the other factors that have been identified in relation to the physical environment and atmosphere of the service-based marketing mix (Horváth – Gyenge, 2020).

- Post-purchase behavior: the act of watching the movie itself is usually the following stage at the end of this process, where it is finally determined whether the selected movie was able to live up to the prior expectations. The review systems of streaming services make the post-evaluation easier than ever, all the while building upon these responses to recommend further similar content to the consumers (Magyar – Reiner, 2022).

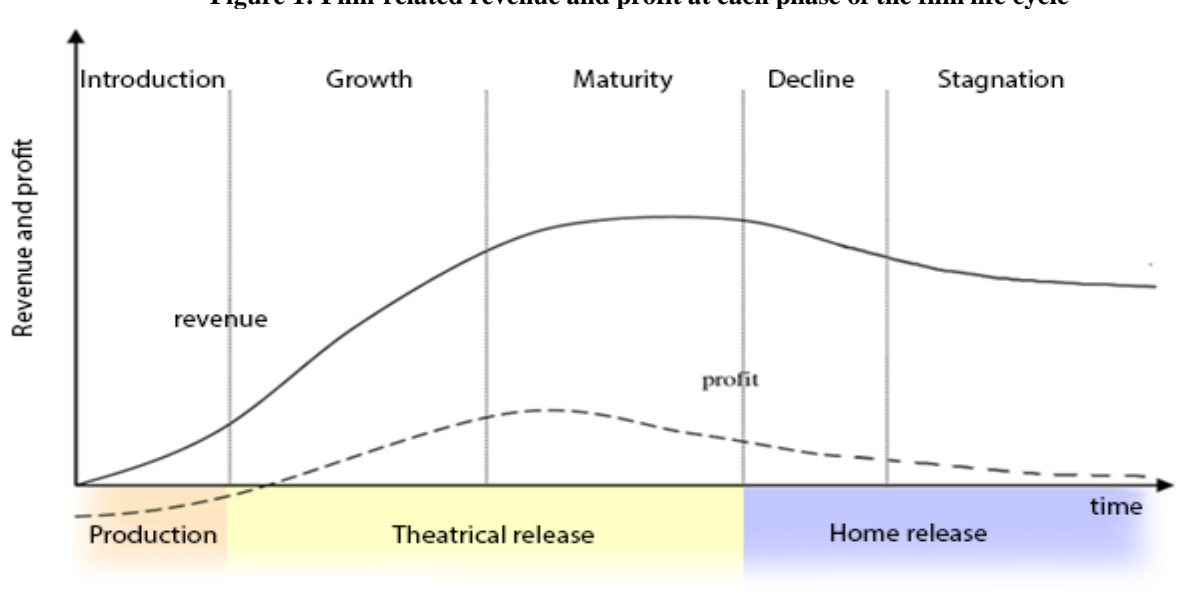
### **III. Connections to the film life cycle model**

The expected market life cycle of an average film may illustrate the factors that influence movie consumption decisions because its cycle is relatively shorter compared to other products and services (Ma – Kim – Lee, 2019). The film life cycle model is based primarily on Kerrigan's (2017) approach to film marketing, which breaks away from a production-centric view that only considers the supply chain of the movie industry. Takó (2014) has identified the following five stages of filmmaking:

1. The birth of an idea for a film.
2. Pre-production and preparation of the project.
3. Film shooting.
4. Post-production.
5. Distribution.

If we consider the film life cycle model within a service-product framework (Horváth – Gyenge, 2020), most of the above stages can be classified within the introduction phase – with notable exception being distribution, which extends over all other phases in various forms.

Figure 1: Film-related revenue and profit at each phase of the film life cycle



Source: Own elaboration (2024) based on Kiss (2014)

The key processes involved in each phase should be examined from the period before filming starts, and it is important to also highlight the connections to analyze the unique marketing mix elements of movies as unique service-products. Similar to other products, the various marketing activities will naturally depend greatly on the specific phase of the life cycle the particular movie has entered (which is illustrated by the life cycle curve in Figure 1).

- Introduction: these are the initial steps in filmmaking: once the first film concept has been approved, the script must be finalized, which helps the actors and crew involved in the filming to get a feel for the different elements and requirements of the scenes (Benyahia – Gaffney – White, 2009). In the meantime, the decision-making processes related to financing and distribution are already underway: assessing and collecting the various public and private contributions, and planning the advertising that can be linked to the film (Parks, 2012; Barsam – Monahan, 2016; Legoux et al, 2016). For the sake of prospects of the film, the issue of age rating is often considered at this early stage, as it is a significant factor in estimating the expected returns on the film (Legoux et al, 2016; MPAA, 2018). Movies with an adult rating (notably the R rating) have to forgo 20-50% of their potential audience (Boggs – Petrie, 2008). The start of filming also provides immediate opportunities for consumer interactions: information that filmmakers leak (either unintentionally or intentionally); news about the main characters; and then the first preview videos and teasers as the project progresses (Epstein, 2012). Filmmakers at this stage mainly provide experiences that are aligned with prior expectations (Kerrigan, 2017).

- Growth: after the movie is completed, it is at this phase that it is screened at various film festivals (although only a very narrow professional audience of critics may watch it at this point). Communication may then include the responses gathered from the early reviews of critics – in the case of independent movies, the positive pre-release reception one of the most important factors of achieving success during the wider release –, as well as longer and more extensive film trailers (Hennig-Thurau – Walsh – Wruck, 2001; Borsos, 2011; Parks, 2012). Reading the first – positive – critical reviews may win over consumers even before the release, which might even result in watching other related movies in anticipation of the awaited release (Jacobs et al, 2015). Producers often use the growth phase and the interest level measured during the festival appearances to decide on further distribution strategies for the movie. Key decisions at this point include the countries in which they wish to release the movie, the scheduling of releases, the type and depth of localization and more precisely the scope of release, which may be limited or wide. They might already start to set up deals for the home release as well, deciding on distribution and streaming partners as well as physical release and potential broadcast rights (Benyahia – Gaffney – White, 2009; Barsam – Monahan, 2016; Legoux et al., 2016; Petróczy – Főző, 2019). This is also the point when they start to map out the possibilities of introducing accompanying merchandising products on the market, and to start scheduling the use of star appearances – organized and managed by the production companies and studios – in the form of interviews, premieres or endorsement of various products (Karniouchina, 2011; Butler, 2012). Finally, it should be noted that at this phase the first pirate copies appear in the illegal circles, which may be internal editions (with missing content, visible watermarks and unfinished post

production processes), that were not intended for consumer consumption. The abysmal quality level of these incomplete versions makes them generally unfit for consumption.

- **Maturity:** this is the phase where the movie is released in movie theaters, therefore this is the point where it is finally aimed at the final consumers. This is often accompanied by a large-scale, national marketing campaign, which makes use of the professional acclaims – as highlighted quotes or taglines – already gained in the previous phase (Borsos, 2011). In addition to the new trailer, the film’s promotion also extends to other communication channels – determined by the target audience and the age rating (Barsam – Monahan, 2016; MPAA, 2018). This is the most important period for the movie’s revenues and cost recovery. For this reason, studios pay particular attention to early viewer feedback and ratings in their calculations and forecasting, prioritizing opening week domestic audience data (Epstein, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015; Legoux et al., 2016; Ma – Kim – Lee, 2019). With considerations to the exact number of movie theaters that screen the freshly released movies, these early audience data are fit to predict the subsequent performance of the movie in most cases (Delre – Broekhuizen – Bijmolt, 2016). This is also the time when the first “cam” versions of the film appear on illegal sites, which means footage recorded by handheld cameras inside movie theater venues, which offers a complete, yet significantly worse experience than the later home releases.

- **Decline:** the time movies are transferred from the silver screen to the consumers’ home systems and portable mobile devices (Schatz, 2009; Kerrigan, 2017). Home releases refer to the release of physical editions, the premium television broadcasts (generally on paid cable networks) and also the inclusion of the various streaming providers’ digital libraries (Parks, 2012; August – Dao – Shin, 2015). The distributing companies make use of the previously collected audience and revenue data, as they focus their communication further to strengthen their brands (Legoux et al., 2016). On the illegal markets this is the point when the pirated versions of physical or streaming editions appear, with near-identical picture and sound quality to the legally available options.

- **Stagnation:** the final phase is when the movies end up in syndication of commercial and public service television channels. Its future will then be in the form of repeated showings, which, depending on its popularity, may last for years, or decades even (Parks, 2012; Szilágyi, 2012). The consumer audience will thus be broadened, as it will be legally available to people who previously could not afford to watch the movie. It should be noted however, that the chances of reaching the general public’s attention in the space of talent- and reality shows, serialized content made for television and all the other movies is not an easy task. A further disadvantage is that, although commercial television channels reach large audiences, the movie watching experience is fragmented by the constant advertisement breaks; additionally, the film’s structure might be altered by recuts – a practice often used to lower age ratings and thus have the ability to use a more favorable time slot (Boggs – Petrie, 2008). Stagnation phase might also extend indefinitely if the movie has positive reception, with the occasional limited theatrical re-releases as well as participation in cult film festivals. These events often coincide with important anniversaries of the original releases, while the movies themselves might occasionally undergo some level of “facelift”, using modern technology to retouch or upscale the original footage. The goal of distribution companies and producers is to rely on a sense of nostalgia while also seeking to attract newer generations of consumers (Gósi – Magyar, 2019).

#### **IV. Connections to the film life cycle model**

In order to better understand movie consumption behavior, it is useful to consider the main principles of influencing factors found in literature in relation to movie consumption. Thus, in the following, we will present how three aspects: social factors and group-based effects, the factors of perception and learning and finally the personality and emotional factors all play a role in the consumers movie consumption related behavior.

##### **4.1 Social factors and group effect**

The groups of which the consumer is already a member of – or wishes to become a member of – have a particularly strong influence on his or her behavior. Similar to product and brand choices in the classical sense, the desire to identify with a group can also influence film choices (Kohli et al., 2021). Watching movies might be classified as both visible and invisible (hidden) consumption based on the degree of group effect influences. Completely different effects may play a role in consumers’ choices depending on whether they watch a movie with friends or alone. For instance, an individual might opt for a particular genre or type or tone when choosing to watch home alone, which they would avoid in a group setting. The same group effect also plays a key part in the choice of method an location to watch a movie: whether or not to go to the movie theater in order to watch a particular movie (August – Dao – Shin, 2015). The reference group is a point of identification for the consumer and therefore its overall value judgement also influences his/her choices: should illegal downloading be the primary method of obtaining a film (because it is not worth spending money on) or should it be done legally (by purchasing or subscribing to a digital service).

Film critics act as a special kind of opinion leaders who analyze and evaluate films on various printed and online (e.g. video) platforms. As many people are interested about their thoughts and follow their advice, they can have a significant impact on individual consumers (Gazley – Clark – Sinha, 2011; Legoux et al., 2016). Filmmakers and distributors treat them with special attention for the very same reason, which allows them to preview movies in special press screenings or at the aforementioned film festivals well before their release, so that they can convey their assessment to consumers before the official release (Borsos, 2011). Problems may still arise from the inappropriate handling of spoilers: some critics try to avoid adding spoilers to their reviews, but as it is often too difficult to give spoiler-free opinion about a movie, many just draw the attention of readers to the “spoiler danger” within their review. However, when looking at aggregated revenues, critics’ ratings appear to be predictions rather than influencing factors – consumers are seemingly much more influenced by general advertising, trailers and the timing of the release (Hennig-Thurau – Walsh – Wruck, 2001). It should be noted that movie consumers often consider the opinions of other consumers to be more honest and reliable – the popularity of platforms, such as IMDb or letterboxd are good examples of this, where “amateur” film reviewers score and rate films (Gazley – Clark – Sinha, 2011; Jacobs et al, 2015; Oh et al., 2017; Ma – Kim – Lee, 2019).

#### **4.2 Perception and learning factors**

According to Hofmeister-Tóth (2006), consumers are bombarded with numerous stimuli every day, and at any given moment there are many influences competing for their attention. The factors that determine the stimuli and their ability to attract attention can be divided into two major groups: external and internal influences.

In the case of external influences, consumers attention is at its highest when there is a new stimulus that differs in some physical characteristic (thus standing out from the crowd of other stimuli), which ultimately may be utilized during the transition from growth to maturity phase, leading up to the theatrical release of the movie. These external factors include size and intensity (which might be key during the period of movie theater release), positioning (preferred positioning of trailers), contrast and novelty (emphasizing uniqueness), repetition (coordinated communication aimed at the release date), and finally color and movement (which may be expressed in the various and effective visual and artistic solutions found in the movie trailer and additional promotional materials).

The internal factors that influence attention have been the subject of many researches, which have led to the understanding that perception itself is also influenced by personal factors (Hofmeister-Tóth, 2006). From a film-oriented perspective, we can highlight three main aspects of these: the first being interest, which is reflected in how much quicker people pay attention to advertisements that already interest them; the second being the motives, found in communication that is finetuned to a particular genre; and finally the expectations, based on prior knowledge and experience about the genre, previous movies (especially in the case of sequels, prequels or other forms of “shared universe”), the creators or the original work that was just adapted (Farkas, 2020).

Classical conditioning or learning may be considered among the various associations that may influence consumer choice. This is why, for example, trailer music (whether it is original work for the movie, or one depicting the musical style of the era) plays such an important role in its success to evoke some form of consumer response (Kollarik – Takó, 2021). The positive experiences associated with watching a movie also belong here (often reflected in within physiological memories, such as tastes and smells), which all add up to the experiential nature of watching a movie, while also defining its context (Fröber – Thomaschke, 2021).

#### **4.2 Personality and emotional factors**

During the consumption of a movie, the viewer enters into a unique interaction with said movie, immersing his- or herself in its virtual world and developing a special emotional attachment to it. This is also essential for experiencing, the pleasure of watching a movie (Oh et al., 2017; Banks – Wasserman, 2019). Such a strong connection is mainly due to the hedonistic and experiential nature of films, which interact with the viewer’s own values and goals (Bassi, 2010). The values offered by films provide both personal and social dimensions, in a way representing a detachment from everyday life. At the same time, they help to develop individual identity, educate, inspire, entertain and bring people closer together (Kohli et al., 2021; Magyar – Reiner, 2022). Importantly, personality also determines media preferences and people’s involvement, and this influences choices – for example between predictable and simple or complex leisure activities (Palomba, 2020).

After watching a movie, consumers may consider additional purchases related to it. Based on their existing knowledge or interest in the story and characters, these may lead to considerations of purchasing additional cultural goods (related movies, TV series, video games or books) or other movie-related products and services (Horváth – Gyenge, 2019). Ultimately, it is these types of relationships that create and sustain the dedicated fan communities that are actively supported by film distributors themselves (Banks – Wasserman, 2019; Kohli et al., 2021).

## V. Summary

The main objective of this study was to review and describe the relationship between consumer behavior and movie watching decisions, with a particular focus on the purchase decision process, the specificities of the film life cycle and the role of individual and social factors. The analyses have shown that movie consumption is not a simple matter of choice, but a multidimensional process in which consumers' choices are influenced by a variety of psychological, emotional and social factors. The study highlighted that the different phases of the film life cycle – from the start of production in the introduction phase to the potentially prolonged period of stagnation –, represent different entry points for consumers.

Based on the practical conclusions of the study, hopefully it may provide the movie industry with useful insights into the mechanisms of consumer decision-making, which can help in the development of marketing strategies – be it fine-tuning scheduling strategies based on life cycle analysis or potentially maximizing consumer engagement. The research could also be used beyond the movie industry to investigate consumption patterns of other cultural goods (TV series, video games or books). However, the study currently lacks primary research, as its nature is the overview of related literature, meaning that all of the theoretical approaches and previous – international – research results presented are drawn from external sources. Thus, further primary research (measuring actual and current film consumer behavior) may be necessary before the results can be applied in practice. Finally, when examining movie consumption habits, it is important to highlight their ever-changing nature, as the market is in a constant state of evolution – especially with the rise of digital technologies and streaming platforms –, therefore the results of this study should be interpreted in a dynamic and constantly evolving context.

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